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Rowland Evans And Robert Novak **Gorbachev's 'Mandate'**

Belying advice from diplomatic experts that President Reagan quickly show arms control cards on his way to the high-stakes table in Geneva, fresh intelligence reveals a trump in his hand: Mikhail Gorbachev's power and prestige as the new Soviet leader have been overstated by the West.

The intelligence, from a well-placed political source in Poland with intimate ties to the Soviet Politburo, discloses a tenuous, less decisive selection of Gorbachev as Communist Party general secretary last March 11 than was reported at the time. He eked out victory by 5-to-4 on a secret ballot against the party's elderly Moscow boss, Viktor Grishin (who was nominated by Gorbachev's archrival, Gregoriy Romanov). The secrecy was demanded by Andrei Gromyko, Gorbachev's champion.

The outside world never can know what happens around the table when the Soviet Politburo picks the new leader of the world's only true empire. But intelligence recently arrived here has a ring of authenticity.

Romanov's nomination of Grishin was calculated to win support for one last round of the geriatric leadership that has burdened the Soviet Union since the late 1970s. Romanov, the clear heir apparent if he could get Grishin elected, told the Politburo that the dying wish of Konstantin Chernenko was that Grishin succeed him, according to these reports.

An alarmed Gromyko, who had confided to a Western statesman a day earlier that Gorbachev would be the new leader, struck back hard. He doubted, he said, that Chernenko had ever stated such a preference on his death bed; the old man was too far gone to confide anything to anyone. He then demanded and got a secret ballot from the eight other Politburo members present.

Reagan administration partisans of the theory that Gorbachev cannot afford to lose in Geneva because of his shaky mandate believe this greatly strengthens the president's hand. They mean that Gorbachev needs an arms control deal for domestic economic reasons far more than Reagan does. The president can avoid buying an arms control pig-in-a-poke.

But Secretary of State George Shultz has labored hard and honorably to work out an arms control package as the centerpiece of Geneva. On Oct. 22, in the final National Security Council discussion of Reagan's U.N. speech, Shultz advised Reagan to insert a couple of strong paragraphs on arms control to accompany the basic thrust of the speech on "regional" issues such as Afghanistan and Angola (though that emphasis originated in the State Department with Shultz's approval). Reagan was quickly told that if he followed the secretary's suggestion, the headlines would center on arms control, not the Soviet-backed regional conflicts Reagan wanted to emphasize. That would advance Gorbachev's plan for an arms control summit, strengthening him back home.

Hence the concern among Shultz's colleagues about what may emerge from his Moscow talks with the Soviet leader. They hope he will engage in positive thinking about Gorbachev's slender Kremlin mandate. While the secretary of state is under domestic and NATO pressure to talk arms control, it can only strengthen the president's adversary at Geneva.

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